Incredibly Strange Games 2

Welcome to Incredibly Strange Games #2

the no white space issue

Ninja Golf may be the quintessential Strange Game; a bizarre mish-mash of a sports game and brawler, complete with giant frogs, levels where you're randomly underwater fighting sharks, and putting greens patrolled by giant dragons. It's also possibly the only side-view golf game ever created.

I first discovered *Ninja Golf* in 1994ish when I bought a blind lot of something like 40 unopened Atari 7800 games and a game system from a guy whose phone number I found posted on UseNet. This was before broadband and Wikipedia, when people were just starting to put together full library lists. I knew about the 7800, of course, but I'd never seen one. Just pictures in a catalog. I had no idea what I was going to get. *Ninja Golf* was literally the last game I pulled out of the box. My mind was blown, especially at how straight everything was played. No tongue in cheek, just a Ninja with a golf club. It quickly became the favorite game of my apartment, as the Atari 7800 displaced the Genesis and the SNES as First Adapter in the endless RF daisy chain attached to me and Jon Snyder's late '70s 13" TV. (The high fidelity of RCA cables was still just a dream at 526b Oak Street in the mid 90s...)

Fast forward 10 years. I'm hiring engineers for a project at a game company and a resume comes across my desk, from David Sullivan (aka DS), with *Ninja Golf* prominently listed. OK, actually, it was listed in about three point type on page four of his C.V. in a category called "other projects," but it still stood out to me. I kept bringing it up in our phone interview, which must have irritated the crap out of him, because he kept trying to turn the conversation back to his relevant experience as a Senior Lead Engineer and Tech Director all over the industry. I just wanted to hear about *Ninja Golf* – anyway we both knew from his resume he had the job in half a heartbeat if he wanted it. He took the job, but he wouldn't take the bait on *Ninja Golf*!

For maybe three years DS and I worked together anywhere from 10 – 20 hours a day, five to seven days a week, and I bugged him about *Ninja Golf* (and other classics he worked on, like *Danny Sullivan's Indy Heat* and an *Ultima* character hacker) about every other week. He wouldn't talk. I assumed that meant there was all sorts of juicy dirt, but no. It wasn't like some state secret, DS just wanted to focus our conversations on the more recent, useful past, and more importantly, the future, such as the projects and engine we were building.

"If we start that conversation you're never going to shut up about it," was the general gist of the responses to either me or Mike Mika if we tried to get him to wax eloquent of the good old days. I always wanted to point out that I wasn't shutting up about it anyway, but DS was our key engineer, so I didn't want to push him too far… (Once when I brought *Indy Heat* up while driving him to the hospital after he broke his arm at the office, he just answered with a gesture using his good arm…)

Anyway, now we haven't worked together for about two years and I *finally* convinced him to come clean over burgers at the Palo Alto Creamery. (Second best burger in Silicon Valley, after St. John's). The pictures didn't turn out (sorry DS), but the interview went OK...

Take it easy!

—Chris

DISCLAIMER! DISCLAIMER!
Everything in here is my opinion, not my employer's. Got it? Good.

JUMP BUG

I ran into this super-famous programmer I know a while ago at a conference. I was like "Oh hey there Mr. X, So-and-So just said they thought you were the best programmer in the history of games." He thought for about two seconds and then said "Yeah, that's probably right. I taught Such-and-Such all he knows, and he taught So-and-So all he knows, and they made This-and-That games, and I am better than either of them, so yeah."

I appreciated that decisiveness, and speaking objectively, he arguably is the greatest game programmer of all time (if not the most modest!).

Anyway I pushed my luck and asked him "So, what's the strangest game of all time?" Most people I ask this question of either hem and haw, or ask me some parameters ("intentionally strange? Can I include PC games?" etc.) in an effort to buy time.

Without skipping a beat — even less time than he spent considering whether he was the greatest programmer of all time — he replied. "*Jump Bug*. Rockola. 1981. You play a VW Bug — an unlicensed VW Bug — that jumps around a side-scrolling environment, scaling buildings and collecting money bags. It's the weirdest game of all time, without exception."

He may be right. It's also arguably the first side-scrolling platformer ever created. And it does indeed feature an unlicensed VW bug, jumping around buildings, collecting bags of money.

One of the fun things about the game is that you're always jumping. You can control how much you jump, but like all VW Beetles, there's no way to actually move without bouncing.

The game is also a forced scroller. So, while it's technically a platformer, what with all the platforms and collectibles and such, it ultimately feels more like an evolutionary stub, sort of *Scramble* gone wrong, more than the hidden inspiration for *Pac-Land* or *Super Mario Bros*. The team was onto something, but like so many near pioneers, they missed.

Dance Dance Immolation

Platform: Arcade + Fire   Developer: Interpretive Arson

It's a pretty simple concept, really. The fire hackers at Interpretive Arson hooked up some *Dance Dance Revolution* pads to a PC clone of *DDR*, and some jets of propane. You climb aboard and play *DDR*. If you do well, jets of flame shoot into the air in time to the beats. Mess up, and the jets of flame shoot directly into your face. What could possibly go wrong?

Needless to say, the IA crew are sort of on the Burning Man side of things, which worried me a bit, as I prefer more of a pinball or Make magazine nerd. But I waited my turn, and as the DJ roared on about doing well at the game and not getting killed and bumping up their insurance, the modern primitive assistant helping me into my flame proof suit whispered to me "we don't have insurance." The suit didn't fit exactly right but she was like "eh… you should be ok." Yeah, there's nothing more reassuring to hear as you're preparing to get sprayed with fire than "you *should* be ok", I assure you!

Her next words were more practical. "Oh, I forgot, don't turn around while you're playing, no matter what." Why not? "Because you'll die." (You don't want fire melting that air hose and shooting under your fire hood.)

Yeah yeah, you're saying, enough with the flowery exposition, how is the game? I have to tell you, it's pretty crazy. Hitting a cool combo and seeing massive pyrotechnics go off really adds to the *DDR* experience. A bit laggy with all the projectors and PCs and fire circuitry, but still very playable.

Anyway, I pretty much suck at *DDR* to begin with and a giant silver fire suit doesn't really do wonders for your coordination or agility, so I messed up, early

and often. That was my plan anyway. I mean, how often can you get sprayed in the head with real fire, right? Or be fine if you stand still, but guarantee yourself a painful death if you just turn around? It was a little like playing *Lose/Lose*, except it was more Win/Win.

No matter what, you will eventually mess up at *DDI*. Seeing flames come towards your face, and engulf your head, millimeters from your eyes and skin, is really a singular experience. It's enhanced by the fact that while you're not actually being burned, you are getting super super **HOT**. Like scalding shower hot, very very quickly. All sorts of "wow, I hope this fire suit works, this would be an exceptionally embarrassing way to go blind or have my face melted or die" thoughts go through your head. I had on a way more ghetto hood on than in the pic, too, which made it even more scary.

But it's also super duper cool. When the penalty for failure is real pain, plus fire, you do try harder. There was a lot of lag, though, and I messed up a lot. Finally I just concentrated on looking at and contemplating the fireballs surrounding my head till they pulled the plug ("Dude you were smoking, that's sort of bad," said my assistant as she helped me out of the suit).

Most location-based entertainment is pretty tame, but *Dance Dance Immolation* really does live up to its reputation. I strongly advise you randomly cruise the back alleys of West Oakland tonight looking for it! Or check out **interpretivearson.com** for safer ways to experience the game...

Sweet pic by Kristen Ankiewicz, **www.ankiewicz.com**

Steambot Chronicles

created by IREM for PlayStation 2

If all you knew was that when you pause this game at a check point, your three menu options are:

. **Get in Mech**,
. **Save Game** and
. **Practice Harmonica**,

you would already be able to appreciate the bizarre brilliance of *Steambot Chronicles*. But it gets better…

Steambot (released in Japan as *Bumpy Trot*) is a JRPG that features characters riding around in steam-powered Mechs (called Trot Mobiles), and engaging in lots of slow, but real-time combat versus evil Mech gangs, notably the Killer Elephants. Of course, Mech-riding is just an avocation. For money, you and your party of characters are professional buskers. That's right, your party performs music on street corners to earn the cash to outfit and upgrade their Mechs.

And so, yes, the gameplay becomes a bizarre mash-up of *Parappa* and *MechAssault*.

It may not seem like it would flow, but the game actually works incredibly well. With soft, semi-cell shaded graphics, and incredibly good writing, plot and localization, *Steambot* has the distinction of being one of the sweetest games you'll ever play. Everyone and everything is loveable (even the Killer Elephants, sorta), and the graphic style and game pacing makes *Steambot* feel as close to playing a Miyzaki movie as you're likely to find.

From the Mech combat to the busking minigames, this is the videogame version of a warm spring day. It is just impossible to be depressed when playing *Steambot*. Even when you're heading to GameFAQS to try and decipher some of the more bizarre side quests, you'll be doing it with a smile on your face.
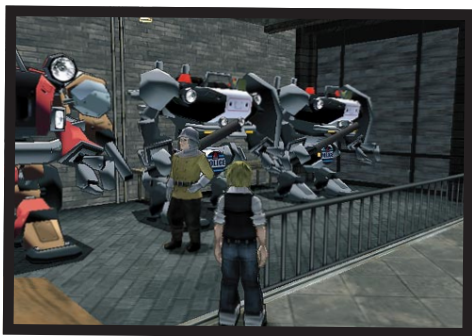
Although IREM showed *Bumpy Trot 2* at TGS a few years ago (complete with a full-scale Trot Mobile you could climb in to get your picture taken), the game has yet to be released (IREM promises it's still coming, now for PS3). However, all is not lost: Atlus released a PSP side story, *Steambot Chronicles: Battle Tournament*. And Majesco released a nice Irem-designed *Blokus* game for PSP that featured, almost unfathomably, a Steambot character tie-in. Hopefully IREM will deliver a proper sequel soon (and Atlus will publish it in the US!).

Today Ninja Golf is a cult favorite. There are Flash remakes and fansites all over the place. But no one's ever told the true story of the creation of the strangest game of all time. Until now!

Ninja Golf:
no secrets mode

Incredibly Strange Games: So, first question, I have to know, did you know how weird Ninja Golf was when you were making it?

David Sullivan: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. I was a contractor, and I had to choose between working on Atari games at Blue Sky and another gig. I went with [Blue Sky], and then they tell me about the game! I was afraid to say anything! In my head I was like, "I can't bad mouth the game!" I was like 20 or 21 and I didn't want to rock the boat, because it was a going to be a good gig.

ISG: Did they know how weird it was?

DS: Oh yeah. They kept saying, over and over, "This wasn't our original idea. This wasn't our original idea. This is what Atari wanted." So they knew. Everybody knew!

ISG: So what was the original idea?

> ## "I don't know who at Atari made the call, but this was Jack Tramiel's Atari, so… gaming was not Job #1."

DS: *Caddyshack*. They basically pitched *Caddyshack* – do a funny golf game. So you'd be able to go in the club house, fight the gopher, all that. It might have been closer to a platformer, with golf swings and shooting golf balls as your attacks. It was a very different game. It

was supposed to be funny.

ISG: So what happened?

DS: Well, at the time, you have to remember this is back in 1988/1989. At that time ninjas were top selling, and golf was top selling, with *Mean 18* and all that. So Atari decided… "Let's put them

> ## "They kept saying, over and over, 'This wasn't our original idea!' So they knew. Everybody knew!"

together!!"

ISG: Who? Someone who'd never played a videogame maybe?

DS: I don't actually know who at Atari made the call, but this was Jack Tramiel's Atari, so… gaming was not Job #1. But it was basically just someone in marketing looking at what was selling, and how many games they could afford to make, and putting together two concepts.

ISG: What was the reaction like to Atari's idea?

DS: Blue Sky tried really hard to change their mind and to go with a funny game, but once Atari said "no," and wanted to play it very straight and realistic, George, who ran Blue Sky, was like "OK, that's it." So we just tried to make the best game we could. We decided to focus on trying to make the fighting good. You know, "ninja to ninja, let's make it good." But it turned

out kind of boring; it had been done before a lot.

ISG: But the game still has some pretty ridiculous moments, like the giant frog…

DS: That was Dana Christian, the game's artist. Actually, he was Blue Sky's only artist, so he was the artist for all their games! Dana was the driving force wanting to make the game funny. I mean, he kept trying through the whole game to sell them on it. But Atari wanted serious, so when they got this silly stuff, like the sharks, they weren't really happy. There was some pushback on that, but it ended up more ridiculous than Atari wanted it.

ISG: How did you come up with it?

DS: At Sizzler. Every single idea in that game was developed at Sizzler! We had three or four or five team meetings a week, with me, Dana, and Dave Dent, who was doing the 7800 version. I'd drive this little yellow Vespa I had up to Kearny Mesa from Clairmont and we'd go to Sizzler.

ISG: Sizzler, that's proud! I seriously think at one point in the late '90s I publicly declared that my two favorite things in life were Ninja Golf and Texas Toast…

DS: Oh, you had to have the Toast! We had a lot of team meetings, more than we needed to. That's where we came up with all the enemies. The only one we all agreed on was the scorpion. The giant frog was… I mean it was horrible! We sat around and kicked out a ton of ideas, and then Dana just drew the frog.

ISG: How was the work divided on the team?

DS: Well, you had Dana with the art, and I focused on Atari 400/800 and Dave did the 7800. Probably about 90% of the actual work, and the actual code, at least

"Every single idea in that game was developed at Sizzler!"

in the 400/800 version is the rendering. [Discussion gets very technical, but suffice it to say that DS did some crazy stuff to get Ninja Golf running on the Atari 400/800 – switching from tile mode to bitmap mode mid-screen, changing the color palettes every scan line, etc. We'll save that for the guys at Incredibly Strange 8-Bit Coding though!]
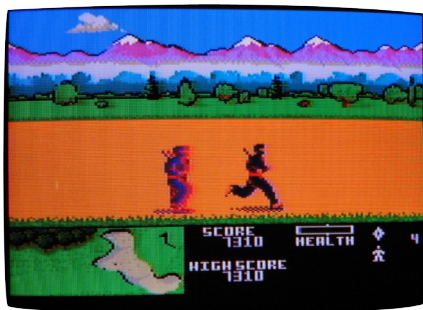
ISG: So no shared code?

DS: Oh we shared all the code, but whether or not you copied it or just looked at it to see how something was done and rewrote it, is kind of academic. I'm sure I used some of Dave's code and he used some of mine. We were buddies. There's always competitiveness among

The game "ended up more ridiculous than Atari wanted it."

programmers, but it was cool. The games were basically identical. Except for some art. At one point I was waiting for art for a milestone, and I needed to get my milestone done to get paid, because I

Ninja Golf: no secrets mode

Ninja Golf: no secrets mode

was a contractor, so I drew a lot of art. That didn't make Dana happy, but I'm pretty sure my gopher actually stayed in, even in the 7800 version. I'd need to see a build to be sure.

ISG: Why didn't you use a 3D view or behind the back view for the golf?

DS: That was the plan all along, to do it like *Mean 18* with a little 3D renderer for the golfing. The combat was obvious — ninja combat just meant *Karateka*, but once we came up with "hit the ball, then fight to the ball,"

as the core concept, golf sort of just got shoehorned in. One day at Sizzler — we were waiting on art so there wasn't a lot to do, and Dave Dent was like "I think I can get golf in tomorrow." So I was like "I can get golf in tomorrow!" And the next day at Sizzler we'd both implemented in side view. So then it just stayed in. There wasn't documentation or design docs or a schedule back then! There was just lunch at Sizzler and the day's plan!

ISG: So how did they do the milestones?

DS: By hole! Hole 1, you get paid so much, Hole 2 you get paid so much, etc.! I had nine milestones, one for each hole!

ISG: <omg wtf bbq laughter> So, what happened to the 400/800 version?

DS: Atari started to drag their feet with Blue Sky, and that put Blue Sky in a

tough spot with me, as a contractor. Basically over a couple of weeks suddenly they got cold feet on the game, and Blue Sky stepped up the pressure on them. Meanwhile I got a full-time job a Leland, which was ironic since Blue Sky was formed by a bunch of guys who'd left Leland, and the game just sort of stopped. There was no bad blood there, though, either way, between me and Blue Sky. Zero. In a way going to Leland made it easy for Blue Sky to stop having to think about me or the 400/800 version and just focus on the 7800 and Atari. And that's about the same time when they started courting Sega [Blue Sky went on to do many games for Sega, notably *Vector Man*].

ISG: So, did Atari get cold feet on the sales projections?

DS: I was a contractor so I'm not really sure.

ISG: Did it sell? The 7800 version?

DS: That's not the question to ask — the question is how many carts did they build? Atari thought it was going to

The milestones were by hole. "Hole 1 you get so much, etc... I had nine milestones, one for each hole!"

sell pretty good. I think they built about 100,000 carts. I think it was more the focus moving away from 400/800.

ISG: What was the budget?

DS: I was a contractor so I wasn't supposed to know… But it was $77K.

ISG: [does some quick math on the schedule, which was about 8 man-months total between Dave Dent, DS,

and Dana] That's nearly the same man-month rate as devel-opment today!
DS: George who ran Blue Sky was a pretty savvy business-man!
ISG: Do you still have a build of the 400/800 version?
DS: I think I still have the source code! But I can't find the massive 5MB hard drive it's on. I think I still have a ROM of the first 8 Holes I got paid for, and a ROM of Hole 9. [Discussion ensues about getting a video of the 400/800 version.]
ISG: Looking back, was it a fun project to work on?
DS: Hell yeah! I was loving life! I was 20 or 21, I got to go to Sizzler for lunch every day, and once I finished the rendering, which was pretty tough, I seriously only worked on the game for a day or so before each milestone. I spent the morning at the beach, went to Sizzler for lunch, went home and got ready for my night job [DS was a bouncer at a night club — he has some good stories, which we'll save for the guys at Incredibly Strange Side Jobs for Engineers]
ISG: Is it still on your resume?
DS: Yeah, everything's on my resume [editor's note: Dave's resume contains his high school jobs!]. It's not highlighted, but it's there.
ISG: Do you consider Ninja Golf the most notorious game you worked on?
DS: What do you mean by notorious? It's not the game I'm most proud of, but it's

not like it's ▮ CENSORED ▮ for Chissakes! … Don't print that!
ISG: …
DS: Nah, do, Tod'll get a laugh out of it! He knows I'm screwing around! Yeah, notorious? No it's not notorious. Am I

I was loving life! I got to go to Sizzler for lunch every day, and … I seriously only worked on the game for a day or so each miletsone.

amazed that anyone remembers it? Hell yes. Am I amazed that it's still something people are talking about? Hell yes. But it's not notorious. If you want notorious, you need to go to the last game Blue Sky did.
ISG: Which was?
DS: *Superman.* For PS1, which didn't come out. …And N64.
ISG: Blue Sky did Superman N64!? For Titus!?
DS: Dave Dent worked on it.
ISG: That's considered the worst game ever released! Holy crap, Dave worked on the strangest **and** *the worst games ever! That's hardcore!*
DS: I don't think it's his proudest game. Titus wasn't always easy to work with.
ISG: It doesn't matter. He did Ninja Golf. His legacy is safe! Dave Dent is a legend! [Discussion descends into why Superman can't be turned into a videogame and game industry gossip.]

Ninja Golf: no secrets mode

2nd Annual "Locals Only" Tournament Results!

The second annual **Incredibly Strange Games Ms. Pac-Man Tournament** went off without a hitch. We moved things to *Dark Void Zero* developer Other Ocean as that's where my Ms. Pac-Man machine is currently living, since old lady Hollyhock discovered the extension cord we had strung up to the I.S.G. clubhouse on 98th from her house. Bitch.

We got about 10x the turn-out of last year's tournament at Cafe Diem, so, almost 30 people showed up and played! I was bummed we ran out of Jim Beam, but the "Gentleman Seth" Old Kentucky Sour Mash Bourbon Style Malt Beverage that Mike found was a pretty good substitute. Ditto with the Oly and the expensive beer flowing from the game industry's only in-studio Keg-or-ator.

Rather than do a double-elimination, head-to-head, round-robin tournament as planned, we ended up just doing a high-score competition, mainly because Toby left the bracket template at the clubhouse. Also, the two other machines we were planning to have on-site were delayed by weather. And the planned appearance by Toro Iwantani didn't materialize, partially because we forgot to invite him. Next year.

The planned appearance by Toro Iwatani didn't materialize, partially because we forgot to invite him.

Isaac Bender, last year's champ, took an early lead, but the pressure was intense from a variety of players including assembly programming legend **Vernon Brooks** and **Tanio Klyce**, engineer and lead guitarist of punk-programming band **Thee Developers**.

Although we play Fast ROM at I.S.G., my stand-up machine is notoriously difficult and stingy with the bananas, versus the "loose" cocktail table at Cafe Diem. Despite several cries of "we may have a kill screen coming up," no one even came close to Isaac's score from last year. Isaac spent much of the night hovering to see if he needed to "next" a game to defend his score...

Meanwhile, Frank Cifaldi and I were locked in a battle in the uber-challenging Low-Score *Ms. Pac-Man*. Here, you divide your score by 2x the maze you were on when you die. You're going for distance, and eating ghosts or fruits can ruin you. One ill-timed banana ingestion handed Frank the victory, but I got past the first baby with under 35K points, a personal best...
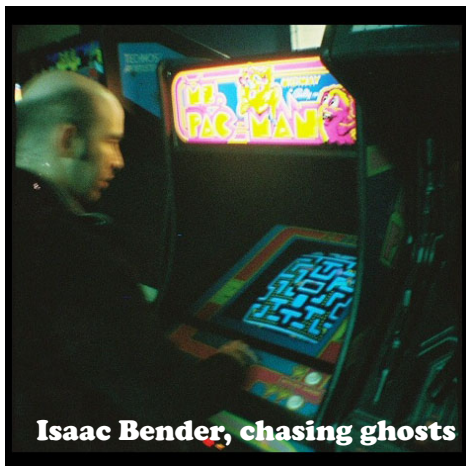

Isaac Bender, chasing ghosts

There was a good variety of side-play as well, with *Star Wars Arcade*, *Ice Cold Beer*, and several pinball machines in constant use by the crowd. A 2600 with *Warlords* clone/upgrade *Medieval Madness* was pretty popular too.

Eventually though, shit got serious. **Norm Badillo** started to put some big scores on the board. His infamous "ghosts last" strategy clearly started getting into Isaac's head, who had several throw-away games, while Norm crept steadily past him. Some say Isaac is in a competitive slump, but he just wrote it off as a bad night. Time will tell.

Then Norm's sister **Sharon** arrived with Pac-Man cupcakes, two kids, and her A Game. Everybody knows Norm is hardcore, but Sharon has serious skills from back in the day, and she distracted everyone with delicious cupcakes while she got some warm-up games in.

Star Wars Arcade side play
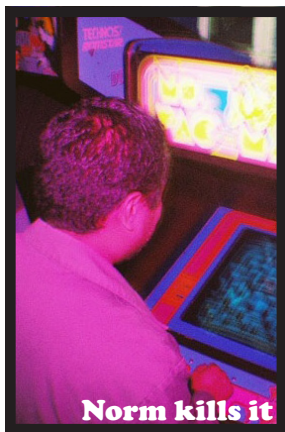
Frank, in particular, seemed enthralled by the small cakes, each adorned with a Nilla-Wafer Ms. Pac-Man, to the point where he lost the ability to focus on *Kaboom!* entirely.

Norm kills it

Before too long Sharon had blown by Isaac and the tournament devolved into a Badillo vs. Badillo civil war for total Pac Supremacy — and bragging rights around the Christmas table.

Sharon came within 800 points of Norm's hi-score run before the ill-timed arrival of a leg-grabbing child on Sharon's last guy sent her straight into **Blinky** and ended the competition, handing Norm the victory.

Despite some controversy over just who might have sent the leg-grabber in from her *Joust* game in the back office, Norm took the title, and the limited edition *Zelda* print grand prize. Frank walked away with a pink Snuggie (literally, about 20 minutes before the end of official time), and I was too busy stuffing cupcakes in my mouth to see how Sharon and Isaac divided the lame prizes.

Overall, awesome turn-out and an awesome time. I have a strong feeling we'll be seeing some kill screen action next year in Oakland. There's already clamoring for the tournament to be held at **Launder Land** on Telegraph in Temescal, home of Oakland's best Ms. Pac-Man machine (and just down from the Avenue bar), so we'll have to see...

RECOGNIZE... TRON TOURNEY 1.0

A few days after Ms. Pac-Man, Norm Badillo sponsored a hardcore, invite-only TRON ARCADE tourney in his legendary game garage, complete with the original film on pico-projection, swedish meatballs, a Street Fighter side game, and some serious competition. Multiple scores were Twin Galaxy level. Mike Mika took the grand prize, and Sharon pulled her trademark move, swooping in at the last second and sniping second place with zero practice games. Sharon is the real deal!
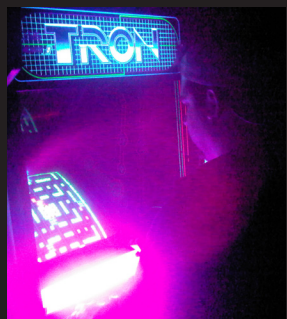
POLYGONS FOR PLOT

The game industry has settled on polygons as the fundamental primitive for 3D graphics, but is there an equivalent for interactive storytelling? The narrative alchemists over at Fail Better Games are on the trail of one, and their proof of concept is the award-winning social game *Echo Bazaar*. It's one of the best-written games of the decade, and the company deserves the attention they've received for it. The interface of the game is a familiar *Mafia Wars*-style text RPG, but its premise — that the city of London has been stolen and brought underground by bats — is twisted and compelling. Once inside, the player finds a universe as deeply compelling as the best fiction has to offer.

But just as interesting as *Echo Bazaar*'s content is its underlying skeleton. For the game, Fail Better designed a new structure for interactive storytelling called Quality-Based Narrative. As the designer of the second game that employed it, I'm very excited about the possibilities it presents for games with plot. Like printed choose-your-own-adventure books, it's easy for non-technical writers to create, edit and collaborate on stories written as Quality-based narratives. Yet the structure allows for truly deep and interactive storytelling that thus far has only been possible in more technically complicated text adventures. Serving as an underlying narrative design, Quality-based narrative could make deeper and more truly interactive stories possible in many other games.

Quality-based narrative breaks down a story-world into parallel narrative axes called qualities. A player's amount of a Quality, represented by zero or a positive integer, represents his progress along that axis. For example, the main stats in an RPG — strength, intelligence, and charisma — can be represented as qualities that get more difficult to raise the further one ascends. In *Echo Bazaar*, one of the central qualities is Dangerous, which is analogous to strength in an RPG: Getting from level 1 to

2 is easier than getting from level 19 to 20. And as the players advance in it, they unlock new story content.

Most RPGs have a linear storyline — as you increase in strength, power and wealth, you advance in the story towards a single winning conclusion. The power of Quality-based narrative is that one can progress along many narrative paths at the same time. Minor stats can serve as auxiliary axes for storytelling: parallel paths to be explored at leisure. In Echo Bazaar, as you play, you may earn personality qualities like Subtle, Ruthless, or Admirable, which unlock new plot points or areas at various levels.

...or play the Storylets your Qualities have unlocked.

Find a way to deal with your Nightmares
Your nightmares are becoming a real problem...
(you unlocked this with **Nightmares 4**)
GO

Play decoy for a street magician
While all eyes are on you, the magician's *other* assistant will pass through the crowd, lifting wallets while attention is elsewhere...
(you unlocked this with **Persuasive 17**)
NEW! GO

Befriend a Tomb-Colonist
You have been asked to 'make a tomb-colonist feel at home' by a representative of a foreign power: to encourage her to stay in the city as long as possible before her return home...
(you unlocked this with **Persuasive 25**)
NEW! GO

Beguile a Useful Official
A representative of the Tomb-Colonies approaches you with an offer: if you can convince a Useful Official into signing an autograph for you, they will pay well for his signature...
(you unlocked this with **Persuasive 25**)
NEW! GO

Qualities don't have to correspond to stats. Many storylines in *Echo Bazaar* so have their own qualities that correspond closely to narrative progress: for example, *troubled by vermin*, or a *finder of Heiresses*. Having 1 of a *finder of Heiresses* might mean you've found a clue, but 2 means you're hot on the trail, and at 3 you're even closer. Even inventory in *Echo Bazaar* is a Quality. Owning five bottled souls is just as effective a narrative axis as, say, a personality attribute, and many plot points in the game require players having acquired items very similarly to the way they require levels of strength or reputation.

While the surface gameplay of inventory, reputation, stats, quests and side-quests should sound very familiar to any RPG player, Fail Better's brilliance is in distilling these game mechanics out of their individual implementations into their common narrative roles. Qualities are not broad or specific enough to accurately simulate physical properties such as a group location or the contents of a backpack. But they closely represent the core of what's going on inside a player's head: progress along a narrative path. Getting stronger, getting richer, hunting an enemy, losing one's mind, earning a sailor's trust: all of these

pursuits in a game, despite their specific mechanics, are also threads of an internal narrative. The Quality-based narrative structure lets writers craft stories with those narrative paths as their fundamental primitive, without getting bogged down with the mechanics of gameplay.

The Quality as the fundamental primitive for interactive narrative helps Quality-based narrative embrace the strengths while avoiding the shortfalls of its antecedent structures. Printed choose-your-own-adventures, for example, use the page as their primitive, and lock pages together with static hyperlinks for choices. This makes the books straightforward for any writer to create, but fragile and prone to breakage during editing. More importantly, because every narrative path requires corresponding pages, it is difficult to reuse content in multiple ways. Most CYOAs end their story branches with death simply to keep the page count from becoming unmanageable. Interestingly, one of the key inspirations for *Echo Bazaar* was *Fabled Lands,* an adventure book series that tried to stretch the CYOA format to its limits.

Zork-style text adventures, by contrast, use programmatic constructs like rooms, verbs, nouns and NPCs as their primitives. While this allows for infinite flexibility, it makes code and content inseparable and therefore requires significant programming expertise in any would-be creator or collaborator. Mixing code and content amplifies the risk of experimental writing (should new writing ever crash a game?) and discourages collaboration.

Quality-based narratives have the potential to be as deep, flexible, and truly interactive as the finest text adventures, without the minefield of mixing code and content. In fact, the form lent by the structure has thus far only helped spur Fail Better's creativity: They document on their blog dozens of entirely new patterns for stories that exist within the framework imposed by Quality-based narrative. And the fact that several writers have collaborated on *Echo Bazaar* speaks well to the structure's improvement over the fragility of earlier forms.

As the first example of a Quality-based narrative, *Echo Bazaar* is mostly a minimal overlay on top of its core narrative engine. But I think that by thinking of Quality-based narrative as an underlying structure or CMS within a more complex game world, the narrative structure could be used to add narrative depth to larger games as well. In a setup like this, Qualities and pieces of content would form a base level of narrative progression and state tracking, woven into a story-world by writers using a CMS. Certain Qualities or integration points in the structure could be tied with code into more complex gameplay systems like item collection, skill advancement, map navigation and social actions. As a result, writers working with a CMS can have a level of integration into key game systems that would otherwise only be attainable by making them learn a scripting language.

ECHO BAZAAR NARRATIVE...

Decode some sinister graffiti — FAIL! — NIGHTMARES! — Confide fears in a friend — Your friend goes insane — Develop a Laudanum habit to reduce your Nightmares — SCANDAL! — Track down a missing heir — SUCCEED! — Friend is still insane — Return home — Seduce the missing heir — Ask friend for help — Confrontation with father of missing heir — Sent into EXILE — Write letters from exile — GO MAD & HALLUCINATE LIZARDS

Many games already do something like this, but in a more special-case, hard-coded kind of way. By redoing their narrative integration as Qualities or a similarly general system, they could gain a flexibility that would help them expand the role and scope of story in their games. For example, *Red Dead Redemption* has an 'honor' rating, where villagers give you better prices if you're a do-gooder, or shoot on sight if you have a reputation as an outlaw. This is essentially an embedded character quality -- much more could be tied to even this one variable, from action options within the main story arc, to the availability of smaller missions, or others, within the environment of the game.

I think Fail Better Games has hit upon something special here: a totally new way of structuring interactive stories that has the promise of integrating authored, narrative plot with true player choice more effectively than has ever been done before. *Echo Bazaar*, the first game of the genre, stands by the quality of its writing alone, but I think, and hope, that its more important legacy will be in the raft of games that are inspired by it to incorporate deeper, more interactive, and more consequential stories.

Thanks to Alexis Kennedy for reading an early draft of this article.

Gabe Smedresman is the co-founder of Echo Team and the lead designer of Crazy Boat: The Curse of the Trash Vortex, a game that i09 calls "the best sci-fi distraction on Facebook"

zombies invade oakland!

By Ava Anderson & Roxie Perkins. Illustrated by Anna Reutinger

Is a Choose Your Own Adventure a game? I don't know, honestly. That's the kind of thing you want to argue about over brunch. I guess I don't care either. I just like them, especially the challenge of trying to represent and track multiple character states with only branching… theoryblahblahblahboringboringboring....

Anyway, if you'd been smart enough to go to the SF Zine Fest, you could have bought this. It's a fantastic CYOA that's at least as deep as anything Edward Packard ever did. Plus, it's got two of my favorite things — Oakland and Zombies.

Briefly, two bike-riding Oakland squatters, Raven and Jorge, wake up one morning to discover... Well… if you've ever read any Zombie fiction, you have a pretty good idea what they discover. What follows is an awesome Oakland adventure that features a number of key Oakland locales, like the Port, Mosswood Park, Oaksterdam, Telegraph, Lake Merritt, Mama Buzz Cafe and more.

PAGE 1

This is probably the best opening of a CYOA ever. Port of Oakland AT-AT crane? check. Zombie? check. What else do you need?

The sun is shining, the shimmering Bay Area smog bounces off the brilliant blue of Lake Merit's waters. It's a beautiful Oakland morning. The abandoned house that Raven, her (mostly) platonic best friend Jorge, and their favorite charity case Josh have been squatting at is warm and claustrophobic, nestled between low rent apartments and the neighborhood liquor store. Clad only in an ex-boyfriends band shirt, Raven rolls off the futon her and Jorge share, gently brushing him with her unshaved leg. It is unusually quiet outside. No children's cries or sirens fill the summer air but

The relationship between Jorge and Raven offers some of the best entertainment. My favorite scene in the book comes when failing to find Raven's Doctor ex-boyfriend, they have to resort to tracking down Jorge's ex-girlfriend, who's a "nurse" in training at Oaksterdam University.
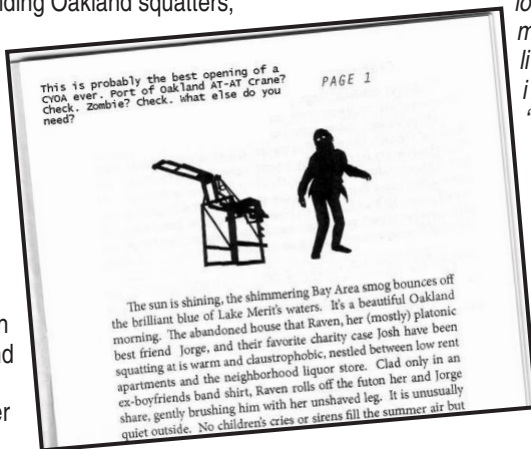
To those who say there's nothing new left to do in Zombie Fiction, I give you some choice quotes from the scene:

…"But Kaylen is just so incredibly, unbelievably, f*cking stupid. She's literally the last person I'd run to in the apocalypse."

"Well," Jorge clears his throat, "it's a zombie massacre not an apocalypse, and she is, literally, the last person you're running to, so suck it up"…

…At first Jorge recoils on instinct from Kaylen's embrace, remembering her fondness for trance music and her short-lived career as an improvisational "womb dancer"…

…"You gotta be f-ing kidding me," Raven says loudly as she examines the incense, Costco-sized bag of Poptarts and newly rolled blunts being handed to them by Kaylen…

SHOULD THEY FORGET ABOUT THE ZOMBIES AND SMOKE OUT WITH KAYLEN IN THE BASEMENT? [TO PAGE 26] OR SHOULD THEY TAKE KAYLEN'S WEED AND HEAD TO THE PORT? [TO PAGE 28]

The prose is violent, gory and descriptive, and the eight different endings all offer distinctly, uh, Oaklandish resolutions to the

a Zombie massacre. You don't usually see Zombie stories with as much romantic tension (or zombie-human homoerotic tension, to be honest) as this, and it's a nice switch. Another departure from the typical CYOA is the use of third-person versus 2nd person. It works well with the dual protagonists, though.

There are some nice spot illustrations throughout the text, which appears to have been printed on a 20-year-old ink-jet printer set to "draft." Still, that adds to the zine charm, and it's still all legible. The copy-editing is

extremely good too.

My only real complaint is it's a bit West Oakland / Downtown focused. Zombies can't come down MacArthur to Fruitvale or the Laurel? What gives? That's a minor quibble, though, in an otherwise awesome adventure.

Zombies Invade Oakland is available for $3 from JETTISON PRESS at anreut@gmail. com, or you can buy it on Etsy at: http://www. etsy.com/listing/57416861/zombies-attack-oakland-a-choose-your-own?ref=v1_other_1

There aren't many games that require actual human blood to play, but the curiously named *Knock 'Em Downs: World's Fair* is one of them. The game comes with the Didget blood glucose monitoring system for young diabetics. The moonitor plugs into the GBA slot on a DS or DS Lite , enabling kids to earn points for regular testing of their glucose levels, or staying within certain blood sugar levels.

Testing your blood sugar as a diabetic is a pretty miserable procedure that involves drawing blood multiple times a day, so you can imagine it's really no fun for a kid, especially given that most little kids are not like overly responsible or self-motivatingly schedule driven. It's no picnic for the adults that have to constantly remind the kids

to test themselves, either.
But by turning the whole monitoring process into a game-like experience on DS, kids are much more interested in the process. Think of it like a Tamagochi,
except instead of keeping a virtual pet alive, they're keeping themselves alive.

The games themselves are on the mini-game side, with players unlocking new items with the points they get for testing. I haven't had a chance to play the actual games, but given that the target audience (5 - 14) are typically pretty uncritical players, I'm sure they're happy. Especially since they can get a doctor's note to bring their DS to school...
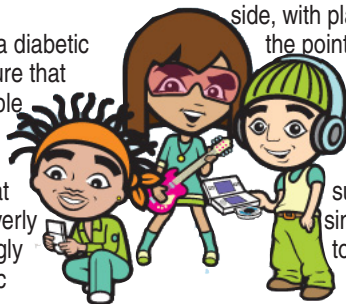
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Answers without Questions

ONE

My ideal coding environment doesn't exist. Wait, do you mean ideal coding environment in the sense of a physical location where I sit and write code, or do you mean the development environment? Actually, it doesn't matter, the ideal versions of neither of those exist as far as I'm concerned. I have really bad ADD, so I need a sensory deprivation tank with a smart firewall that only allows enough Internet through to do research on the problem at hand, but that also has a robot that will come and find me if I haven't submerged in it by 10 am, and I want a developement environment that knows all the dumb stuff about programming, so I never have to repeat myself or copy and paste code or type boilerplate nonsense or wait for a compile or seach all the files in the project looking for something.

I'm not holding my breath for either of those, so for now, I tend to work in one of three places: a) my dining room, which is bad, because I usually just sink into email and don't get much done, b) my garage office, which is good when I can get myself out there, because I don't allow myself to do email in the garage, or c) Jonathan Blow's apartment when we do an Indie Work Day, which is also good because we mock each other brutally if we're not being productive. For development, I use emacs.

TWO

I think it's great that indie games are a viable place to do experimental work professionally these days; that's totally awesome. However, I do worry about the focus on quickie experimentation, as I ranted last year at GDC: http://chrishecker.com/Please_Finish_Your_Game

I want more developers to do experimental stuff, find interesting and new gameplay, and then actually follow through and explore the space they've discovered. Too often people find a new area, and then just quickly pee on it and go back to writing another shmup/roguelike/platformer.

I also think there are different flavors of experimentation, and some are more valuable than others. Finding a new wacky gameplay mechanic is cool, and it's certainly better than just writing another shump/roguelike/platformer, but I think game designers need to start pushing in directions that impact the player in deeper emotional ways. I'm not getting any younger, and I really want to live to see the day when games are accepted into the pantheon of art and entertainment forms alongside music, film, literature, and visual arts. We are not going to get there unless we start doing games that are as deeply moving as the works in those forms.

THREE

Hmm, enjoyed? I don't actually enjoy most games, so that's a hard question. I think there are plenty of games out there that are simply strange for the sake of being strange, but I don't think that's really very strange, strangely (or not). I think context has a lot to do with real strangeness, and a lot of that context happens in real life. I remember playing Go at a parlour on a back street in Tokyo where they'd probably

never had a Caucasian set foot in the place, and that was pretty strange. Or, on 9/9/2001, a friend and I were brainstorming the best way for a terrorist to attack the United States... that was a pretty strange game, in retrospect.

FOUR
Greatest game ever made, or my death sentence. There is no middle ground.

If you want a PR blurb or game description, go to http://spyparty.com, I'm going to kick it philosophy-style here: The main high-level goal behind SpyParty is to make a player-skill game about subtle human behavior, where the game's core skills are perception and deception, the way aiming, shooting, and map navigation are the skills in a game like Counter-Strike. I would love it if somebody who has never played a video game before, but who has really good intuition and people skills, could do well at the game from the start. It would be awesome if players came away from SpyParty with a heightened sense of awareness about people, and what constitutes normal versus exceptional human behavior, or intentional versus ambient behavior. Also, the ideas of keeping your cool under pressure and scrutiny, and making consequential decisions with incomplete information are both big themes of the game. I'm hoping to get e-sports levels of player skill into the game, so there are going to be a lot of paranoid and deceitful folks walking around, if I have my way.

From a development standpoint, I hope to learn a lot about what it takes technology- and design-wise to make normal humans do normal things in normal environments. As an industry, we know a lot about making space marines do exceptional actions in hostile environments, but not so much about normal stuff. At E3 this year, I was working on the underlying code allowing people to pick up things in the game, and I literally couldn't find a single other game besides The Sims and Heavy Rain where characters even pick objects up at all, you know, like with their hands.

FIVE
Well, a paycheck would be one obvious thing. I have a fantasy that a "rock band" (like, actual rock musical ensembles, not the video game by Harmonix) is the right model for making the most creative games, but I think it's hard

to find the right group of people and build that trust. It's easy to tell in 5 or 10 minutes whether somebody is a good musician, but it's not that easy to tell if they're a game developer worthy of your creative trust as a peer for 3 years.

Working by yourself is good and bad...if you do something awesome, you know it was all you (or luck, I guess, but it's your luck!) and that's incredibly satisfying, but it gets lonely and it's nice to bounce ideas off people who are working on the same project, which is different from talking to other indies working on their games. That's cool too, and vital, but it's different.

SIX
"Cool" is not the word I would use to describe the Indie Game Barn, because it was uninsulated, and the roof was one of those barn roofs that had the four different angles on it, and it was perfectly aligned with the path of the sun, so it was basically an oven in there for a couple weeks a year. It was, however, a fun space and a great group of people. I will point out, though, that not a single game except Sean Barrett's Chromatron actually shipped from the Barn, and even that was developed on xmas break at his mom's house. We birthed a lot of coolness, like the Indie Game Jam, but one has to be realistic and look at the metrics, and it was a disaster as far as getting games done. As Old Man Murray would say, "Science is not about your feelings."

Learn More Secret Plans at: SPYPARTY.COM
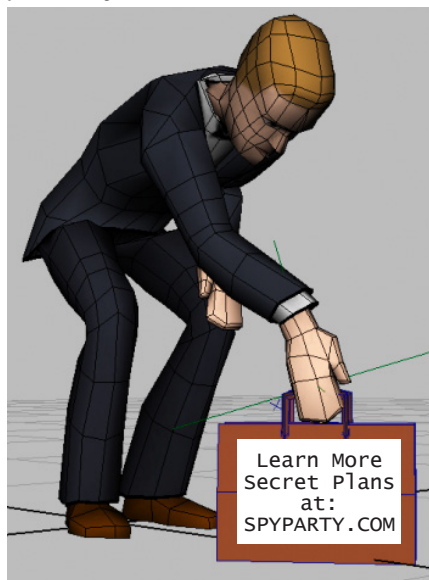
I recently switched jobs. One cool thing about my old gig was I had tons of free space to store giant stacks of vintage microcomputer software. (I had a little collecting problem there for a while, which is how I ended up with all the Apple IIc's.)

In the process of packing up and moving all my games, I found this Atari ST game behind my wall of Infocom games and I'm really not sure how it got there. It caught my eye right away because it had such a weird form factor — like a giant over-sized cassette case.

It also had what has to be the most *tender* cover art I've ever seen for a trivia game. Two dudes, one tall and thin, one short and chunky, stand together on a cliff in the desert watching a brilliant sunset, or maybe a fiery sunrise. It's not exactly what immediately springs to mind when I think of *Trivial Pursuit*, but hey, it is subtitled *A New Beginning*, so who am I to judge?

I flipped the box over and things got awesome. Rather than deal with a board, *Trivial Pursuit: A New Beginning* fast-forwards you to 2045, when the Earth is dying from pollution and the greenhouse effect (that's not a sunrise, it's the destruction of the earth, by the way). Humanity's got one chance: the "far away but habitable planet of Genus II." You get there
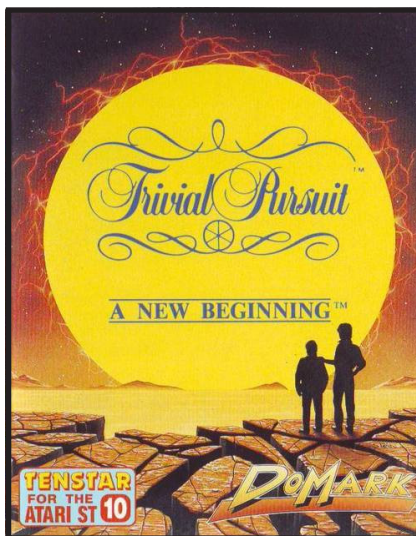
by flying a laser-powered rocket ship to six different galaxies, and interacting with alien races you find.

The aliens, of course, want to ask you trivia questions. If you answer them correctly, they may give you a wedge shaped artifact. (I can't actually play the game, as I have a lot more Apple IIs than Atari STs, but I assume failure is punished by disintegration, or being fed to a Sarlac or something.)

If you can collect six of the wedges, you can make it to Genus II, where you face the Genus II High Council.

I'll be honest: The screenshot on the back of the box may be my favorite screenshot of all time. What would the Genus II High Council ask you to prove your worth to bring your entire race to Genus II? What do you think they'd ask…

Who is Martina Navratalova's most frequent doubles partner?

I love it. Replacing rolling dice with randomly selecting planets from galaxies that represent the 6 different subject categories in the game is actually sort of genius, but this has to be the strangest milieu for a trivia game of all time, even beating out my previous favorite, Capcom's excellent Trivia Action RPG, *Quiz & Dragons*.

ENDLESS FROG KIDS

By James Andrews, for PC & Mac (created with Processing)

This is a cool little puzzle game. Your goal is to get one frog (any frog) to the exit. To get there you'll need to create platforms out of frogs. And to create frogs, of course, the frogs have to make ferocious frog love. Anytime a boy frog is facing the back of a girl frog, and the player pushes Z, the frogs make the frog nasty and a new frog emerges (obviously) from the head of the female frog. Depending on the level, the kids will be boys or girls. The actual frog sexing is handled as tastefully as possible (see below) with a "censored" sign coming up after the frogs doff their clothes.

ABOVE AND BELOW

NOW PRODUCING

TO PLAY PRESS Z AND ARROWS
PRESS R TO RESET LEVEL
PRESS Q TO RETURN TO LEVEL SELECT

All the frogs move in unison at the same rate, so the game really becomes a lot of frog location management. Between levels, you're treated

LEVEL COMPLETE
FOR NEXT LEVEL PRESS Z

DID YOU KNOW?
A SAMPLING OF COGS IN THE GLOBAL MACHINE CONFIRMS
THE GLOBAL MACHINE IS HEARTLESS
A STATISTICALLY SIGNIFICANT PERCENTAGE DO NOT WORRY
WHEN FROGS ARE SQUISHED FOR THE GREATER GOOD

NO   YES

FIGURE THREE
RESPONSE TO POLL QUESTION
ARE YOU NOT HEARTLESS?

to cool, non-sensical pages of stats and facts about frogs, rendered in the game's low-fi style.

Endless Frog Kids is short, but a ton of fun. I haven't seen anything like it in concept or execution before. Maybe because the subject matter is considered crude it was ignored in the IGF last year only earning a honorable mention in the student comp. Total injustice! This game is sweet, and I'd love to see a level editor released.

At the end of the day, I don't know if James Andrews had an idea for a platform-creation puzzler and settled on frogs as the best way to do it, or if he was like "damn, I really want to make an anthropomorphic frog mating game," and ended up with this, but either way it's a victory for the amphibian-sex puzzle genre in particular, and strange game fans everywhere.

check out the game @ http://www.eecs.berkeley.edu/~jima/froggame/

It is the '90s, and there is time for...

THERE IS TIME FOR ...

KLAX

DON'T MIXED DRUGS

TENGEN

SINCE 1990

Klax Cigarettes